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JESUS AS A TEACHER: TOWARD AN INTERPRETATION

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I

The attempt to write what for want of a more accurate term we still call a life of Christ has been hampered from the earliest times by a twofold difficulty, which has never been successfully surmounted, because to a large extent it is really insurmountable.

There is first of all the difficulty of so combining the various incidents handed down pellmell by tradition as to make them present an orderly and intelligible sequence. We are not thinking of the truly desperate task of reconciling the synoptic with the Johanne tradition; but confining ourselves to the former, or looking for the moment at the earliest of our witnesses alone, we find that it is possible to arrive at widely divergent conclusions as to the value of the Markan scheme, Professor Burkitt, for example, maintaining that "the narrative of Mark . . . in its main outlines and arrangement fits without violence into the framework of secular circumstances and events," so that "we are not at liberty seriously to disturb" its proportions,¹ while Weinel bluntly states that "the narrative frame into which Mark has fitted the old tradition concerning Jesus is quite defective and disfigured by apologetic tendencies."² But when we have devised what we regard as a plausible, probable arrangement of our material, in which one occurrence seems naturally and convincingly to lead on to the next, we are confronted by the even more formidable task of fitting into this framework of events the recorded sayings of our Lord—to divine, that is, when this or that word was really spoken. This latter task frankly defies accomplishment, and the guesses of the synoptists

¹ *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, pp. 103-4.

² *Jesus im XIX. Jahrh.*, p. 75.

are only guesses, often conflicting, the identical utterance being inserted in different settings as we pass from one Gospel to another.

The fact is, and it cannot be too plainly realized, that the facilities of the synoptic writers in this respect were no better than our own. At the time when they composed their treatises a great many of the teachings of Jesus were still current, but recollection as to when or where he had uttered this or that saying was already hopelessly lost. It is now generally understood that within a generation of his death there existed a written collection of such remembered sayings—the quarry, (Q), to which both Matthew and Luke are so largely indebted for the non-Markan material in their respective gospels; but which saying belonged to what occasion was, as a rule, not so much matter for surmise as rather past all accurate surmising.

Matthew is so conscious of this that he has recourse to the simple expedient of grouping events and sayings in alternate sections, a fact which even the casual reader cannot fail to notice. Thus, after relating the ministry of John and the Lord's baptism and temptation, he places at the very opening of the public ministry of Jesus the three long chapters of teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount; these are followed by a series of nine miracles and a narration of the general progress of the work of Jesus, after which we have seven parables, and then go on to events again. Clearly, such an arrangement is too artificial to represent the real order in which things happened; Matthew did not know that order, and his mechanical grouping is a confession that he did not know it. Not only is the sermon on the Mount anything but a consecutive deliverance, made on some one occasion, but some of the most characteristic of the sayings of which it is compiled, those in which the Lord most definitely repudiates the Mosaic law, plainly do not belong to the opening stages of his activity but to that intensely critical phase which preceded his withdrawal from Jewish territory. Matthew, in plunging us straightway *in medias res*, is actuated by strategic and not by historical considerations: here is what he rightly felt to be the program of the Gospel, and he sets it in the forefront, for his readers to grasp at once. From his point of view Matthew was perfectly justified, as was Luke in

assigning to a supposed Samaritan ministry an embarrassing wealth of surplus material for which he could not find room elsewhere. What we have to bear in mind is that our Gospels were written, in the first place, not as works of history but of edification, and that purely historical considerations were at most of secondary interest to the sacred writers.

We shall accordingly abandon the ingenious but quite futile guesswork which points to this incident as having given rise to this parable, and to that admonition as having been called forth by that episode; nor shall we imagine that in seeking to understand Jesus as a Teacher we either can or ought to find some likely niche for every one of his utterances. On the other hand we shall, for the purposes of such an interpretation of the mind of Christ, have to keep certain principles clearly before us.

1. In the first place, and as a quite necessary precaution, we must remember that we have at most only a selection of the Lord's sayings, representing, no doubt, the most priceless gems that fell from his lips, but necessarily incomplete. When we reflect that the whole of the sayings reported in our first three Gospels could be read aloud, with proper impressiveness, in some five or six hours, the inference is fairly obvious; we can perceive plainly enough what were the topics which predominantly occupied the Master's thoughts, but we can never say with positive certainty that because we find no reference to some other topic in his utterances that he never referred to it. There is nothing to warrant such an argument from silence, which is only the silence of the documents.

2. Again, we must not make the fatal mistake of approaching these fragments of the Lord's deliverances as though they constituted a system or a code of legislation. Any attempt to work them up into a "handbook of Christian ethics" is foredoomed to failure, and all such handbooks are artificial productions. Jesus did not set up to be a second Moses, replacing one body of rules and enactments by another; his teachings bear the mark, not of prepared addresses, but of inspired impromptus, flashes of wayside wisdom called forth by wayside incidents, striking illustrations and similes prompted by some actual situation, memorable epigrams, aphorisms, paradoxes, all of them revealing a highly original, individual

mind, but at the farthest possible remove from a systematic treatment of the principles of either faith or conduct. Jesus was not a systematizer; but the words which he spoke were spirit, and were life.

3. Thirdly, and this is of the highest importance, we shall have to remember all the way through that Jesus devoutly shared the eschatological hopes of his age and people, that he was looking forward to the close-impending dissolution of the world, and that such expectations could not but color many of his precepts. Here we shall find the principal explanation of not a little that puzzles us in some of his injunctions; we shall recognize that this and that saying was framed with a view to certain temporal circumstances, or the outcome of certain current presuppositions, and consequently applicable to those circumstances only, but not binding upon those who are quite differently situated, or upon an age which no longer holds the presuppositions in question. Jesus, like every teacher with a living message, addressed himself to his own generation first and foremost, a generation facing many specific problems to which nothing in our day corresponds; and we shall accordingly discriminate between what was meant by him for that particular phase and what remains valid for all time in his teaching.

4. It is perhaps scarcely necessary to add the general caution that we cannot be certain of possessing his words in the form in which he uttered them; that we can see for ourselves, by comparing Gospel with Gospel, how naturally and inevitably they underwent modification in the process of transmission from mouth to mouth; that occasionally he was misunderstood even by his original listeners and consequently no doubt often misreported; and that in any case our Greek Gospels furnish us only with translations, the infallibility of which we have no reason to assume, of the Aramaic dialect which he spoke.

II

The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels comes before us unmistakably as a teacher, and is so addressed alike by his disciples, by the general public, and even by his opponents; this point is obscured for us by the English translation, which renders the term by Master, the Revised Version giving teacher as an alternative, whereas it is

simply the correct equivalent of the original. It is therefore well to emphasize the fact that where we read the term Master in the Gospels, especially as addressed to Jesus, the Greek, with only three exceptions,¹ reads διδάσκαλος, διδάσκαλε, and the term actually used was without doubt "Rabbi."² In the eyes of his contemporaries, of friends and foes, Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher.

The reason why it is necessary to lay such stress on this elementary fact is that we have witnessed of recent years a very determined endeavour to represent the teaching activity of our Lord as something quite secondary and relatively negligible. The eschatological element in his thought—an element which we have no desire whatever to minimize—has been proclaimed to be the only thing of any significance in his ministry; so much so that an eminent theologian like the late Father Tyrrell did not scruple to maintain that of the two constituents in the deliverances of Jesus that which he called apocalypticism, viz., the eschatological hope, was the central, and what he called moralism, only an incidental one. "What need," he asked, "of a new ethics for an expiring humanity?" Jesus expected the end of the age in the immediate future; therefore he could not have troubled much about teaching a way of life! The answer to such a complete inversion of the facts is the circumstance, just noted, that Jesus was habitually addressed by the people as Teacher; and the still more overwhelming answer is, of course, the mass of teachings themselves that have come down to us, and which his contemporaries evidently cherished as of exceeding worth, and by no means only of "incidental" interest.

When, therefore, a scholar of such acknowledged eminence as Professor Burkitt states rather joyfully that "there is nothing in the creed about Christ as a teacher of the higher morality—in fact, he is not spoken of as a teacher at all," he is merely making a statement about the creed, but not about the Christ of history, who, notwithstanding his eschatological prepossessions, was very distinctly a teacher, known as such in his lifetime, and remembered as such after his death. By the time the Gospels came to be written, the fervent hopes of the Kingdom being "at hand" were little

¹ Luke 8:24; 9:33 uses ἐπιστάτης, "overseer," and Matt. 23:10 καθηγητής, "leader."

² Cf. John 1:38.

more than dying embers, while the Christian ethic burned with a steady flame; in other words, the perishable perished, the enduring endured.

These preliminaries disposed of, we are now in a position to ask, What were the ruling ideas of Jesus in the domain of conduct? He is a teacher of what Professor Burkitt somewhat scornfully calls "the higher morality"—much as people used to refer to "the higher criticism"—precisely because his whole view of morality is based upon religion, upon the fundamental conviction of God's Fatherhood, his care for and good-will toward the individual. This conviction was peculiarly his own; by which we do not mean that others did not call God by the name of Father, but that he stood alone in the intensity with which he realized this truth and made it the criterion of all his thinking and acting.

It was this fact—the Divine Fatherhood, and the consequences flowing therefrom once it became a fact, and not merely a theory—which carried him in instance after instance beyond the limitations of his age and race, rendered him so unconscious of those limitations that he was not conscious of transcending them. Formally, his scheme of thought was bounded by Jewish nationalism, insomuch that he declared himself to have been sent to none but the lost sheep of the house of Israel;¹ but in reality and in practice these boundaries were overthrown and done away with in the light of the conviction that God was the universal Parent, who maketh his sun to rise not only on Jew and Gentile alike, but on the evil and the good,² and in the exercise of his bounty ignores far deeper divisions than those of nationality. Nominally the gospel message, the good tidings of salvation, is solely intended for the Hebrew race³—a thought expressed in such uncompromising terms as leave no room for the posthumous injunction to make disciples of all the nations;⁴ but whenever Jesus develops his theme, there is never a question of anyone being shut out from the Kingdom on racial grounds; the standard is simply that of doing good or leaving it undone. Jesus the eschatologist is bounded in his vision by the affairs and aspirations of his own little nation; Jesus the moralist immediately

¹ Matt. 15:34; cf. Matt. 10:6.

³ Matt. 10:5.

² Matt. 5:45.

⁴ Matt. 28:19.

becomes a universalist, because he preaches a universal ethic, the inevitable inference from the universal Fatherhood of God: "Which of you that is a father. . . . If ye then how much more shall your Heavenly Father" In such language the narrowness of nationalism is left behind for good and all. Nothing is more striking than that he who had forbidden his disciples to go into any city of the Samaritans was to frame the immortal parable of that "good" Samaritan,² whose practical kindness to the Jew who had fallen among robbers placed him so infinitely far above the level of the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side.

It is perfectly easy—and perfectly futile—to point to details such as these as instances of self-contradiction and inconsistency; what we do see in them is the Lord's own specific genius asserting itself victoriously over those less generous conceptions which formed a portion of his inheritance. We see him at one moment to all appearance securely fettered in the old views which he had taken over from his environment, as we all do; the next, he has burst his fetters without a conscious effort, as the butterfly bursts the dead integument of its chrysalis stage and unfolds its wings in the sunshine.

III

And just as Jesus, by dint of his one governing belief, passed beyond the barriers of Jewish nationalism, so the same assurance of God as Father carried him beyond the confining hedge of the Jewish law almost ere he was aware of having passed its frontiers. We may take it that there was a period when the Lord conceived himself to be simply resisting the ever-advancing encroachments of tradition,³ while holding fast to the law itself. This has been the experience of reformers over and over again; they imagine themselves to be merely protesting against the abuses of a system, when in reality there is an irreconcilable difference, a gulf, deep, if not yet wide, fixed between the system itself and their essential outlook, a gulf which they may be some time in perceiving, and which their opponents may perceive before they themselves do. It is thus quite possible that Jesus did say, "It is easier for heaven and earth to

¹ Matt. 7:11; Lk. 11:13.

² Luke 10:25-37

³ Mark 7:8-13.

pass away, than for one tittle of the law to fail.¹ It is quite possible that he did say, "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of heaven."² It is strongly possible that he protested, genuinely shocked and even distressed, against the suggestion that he had come to destroy the law.³ He sincerely believed his quarrel to be only with the tradition-mongering and casuistry of the scribes and Pharisees, whereas he stood for the Divine law in its purity: "Full well do ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your tradition. For Moses said"—and so forth; that is the attitude of one who means to vindicate God's ordinance against human inventions. When he is asked, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" he immediately and characteristically retorts, "What is written in the law? How readest thou?"⁴ This again was merely the inherited attitude which he shared with the great mass of faithful Jews; and yet his innermost certainty that God was the Father of mankind led him by imperceptible degrees first to question, then to criticize, and in the end boldly to reject the law as the ultimate authority.

From the strictly Jewish point of view, God was the supreme and absolute Ruler and Lawgiver, who had chosen to promulgate these particular statutes, but might quite as easily have given an entirely different set of commandments, and was in any case entitled to implicit, unquestioning obedience to his will, just because it was his will—*Hoc volo, sic jubeo; sit pro ratione voluntas*. Jesus, on the other hand, saw in the law the will of a Father, not an arbitrary Ruler, the expression of *good-will* toward men, his children; the law, then, was for men's sake, and to be obeyed because it ministered to their well-being, from which it was a short step to the rejection of any particular enactment that did not promote, but rather came into conflict with, human well-being. The Sabbath was made for man: which meant that it was to be observed so far as it was a help, but that its prescriptions might be set aside unhesitatingly when they became mere burdens, or hindrances to well-doing. Here Jesus stands with one foot across the threshold, not

¹ Luke 16:178; cf. Matt. 5:18.

³ Matt. 5:17.

² Matt. 5:19.

⁴ Luke 10:25 ff.

of the Pharisaic tradition, but of the Mosaic law itself, to which he tenders only a conditional submission. When, however, he made his protest against such established principles as "an eye for an eye;"¹ when he laid down the rule, "Swear not at all;"² still more, when he set aside the whole ritual concerning clean and unclean food,³ he had stepped outside the tabernacle altogether, and he who had once deprecated the breaking of one of these least commandments had grown conscious of the gulf between his way of looking at conduct and the old dispensation, between morality and legality. Once more, it was his own ethical and spiritual genius triumphing over the trammels of that current opinion which he had shared at first, but in due time was bound to shed, even as when that which is perfect is come, that which is imperfect is done away.

And now, from what has been said up to this point, an important inference follows. In considering the teaching of Jesus we shall not feel compelled to regard every reported saying of his as necessarily of the same authority as every other such saying, but recognize that the mind of the great Teacher underwent development; and we shall judge each one of his utterances by the criterion which he himself applied—and applied as a solvent to the principles of nationalism and legalism—that is, the supreme truth of God's good Fatherhood. Whatever cannot be reconciled with this truth we shall set aside, after due and reverent examination, as unreservedly as he himself set on one side his earlier unquestioning acceptance of every jot and tittle of the law. If, for instance, we come upon reported deliverances of his which seem to teach endless punishment in the world to come, we shall in the first place gravely question whether some figurative phrase of his has not been misunderstood by literal-minded hearers; and in the second, we shall be acting in accordance with the precedent set by himself if we use his own standard of judgment, and say, "Which of you, being a father," would so treat even a grievously disobedient child? "If ye then . . . , " how much less your Father which is in heaven? We may thus formally dissent from some saying attributed—and possibly quite wrongly attributed—to our Lord, and yet be in

¹ Matt. 5:38.

² Matt. 5:34.

³ Mark 7:14-23.

entire agreement with his spirit. For whatever else may be doubtful, it is not doubtful at all that he taught that God's relation to men was that of a parent to his children, and we not only can but must reject anything that is out of harmony with that basal axiom.

IV

We have seen that Jesus, at the commencement of his public career, still shared his people's attitude toward other nations and their veneration for the Mosaic law; that traces of this earlier outlook remain among his sayings; but that he proceeded, probably by very rapid stages, to emancipate himself from these inherited limitations, substituting universalism for nationalism and morality for legality. We must now go on to glance at certain other features in his teaching which are apt to perplex us until explained, and see if some satisfactory explanation is not available.

The message of every teacher or prophet is inevitably conditioned and colored by the environment in which he is delivering it, and especially by the opposition he has in view; even if it is to be "for all time," it must first of all be "for an age"—for *his* age—or he will be beating the air. The man who has nothing to say to his contemporaries is not likely to have anything to say to their descendants. That his contemporaries may spurn his message with ignominy makes no difference; it has to be addressed to the living present if it is to be received by the unborn future. This simple truism applies to our Lord as much as to any other teacher; his teaching took the particular form it did because of the particular system of thought he was fighting, and the extreme form in which that system prevailed accounts for the extreme form in which he frequently states his contrary positions. He is not expounding his ideas in the serene tranquillity of some grove of Academe, but in the heat and dust of battle; the circumstances under which he spoke did not lend themselves to careful balancing or making allowances for exceptional cases, but called for bold and clear-cut pronouncements. We shall not be going too far if we say that the one-sidedness with which he had to deal could only be redressed *there and then* by a corresponding measure of one-sidedness of his own. Everyone knows how true this is in steering a boat which

is making straight for the river's bank: a quick and even violent pull in exactly the opposite direction is the only way to restore the vessel to the middle course, which is the one desired by the steersman. Now we submit that a great many of the teachings of Jesus are to be understood and in practice interpreted on precisely the same principle; the heightened language, the absolutism, the paradoxical form which meet us again and again in his precepts find here to a large extent their explanation.

Let this suggested principle of interpretation be brought to the test. Pharisaism gave the most explicit sanction to the practice of retaliation, a sanction which encouraged the dangerously vindictive temper of an oppressed people: Jesus, shocked by the manifestations of this vengeful spirit, warns his hearer that even to be angry with his brother brings a man within danger of condemnation,¹ that being the one way in which he can restore the balance. His compatriots were over-ready to return blow for blow; he commands his followers rather to suffer a second blow than to pay back the first in kind,² an injunction which only a literalist would take literally, while he was speaking to Orientals. Pharisaism made divorce easy, and that on quite frivolous grounds: Jesus declares marriage to be indissoluble under any circumstances whatever,³ striking a note of such uncompromising absoluteness that by the end of the century, when Matthew composed his Gospel, it was already found necessary to add a qualifying clause to his pronouncement.⁴ Pharisaism made much of vows and oaths in the routine of everyday life, and naturally the next step was the devising of all sorts of disingenuous subterfuges to absolve a man from his oath, or even to make the oath itself a subterfuge to excuse him from carrying out his natural obligations.⁵ Jesus, aghast at the sanctified deceitfulness which flourished as the result of this bad popular custom, exclaims, "Swear not at all."⁶ Pharisaism, with its doctrine of merits, made the law-observing Jew God's creditor, entitled to demand a *quid pro quo*.⁷ Jesus on the other hand asks, "Doth the master thank the servant because he did the things that were

¹ Matt. 5:22.

² Matt. 5:39.

³ Mark 10:5-12.

⁴ Matt. 5:32; 19:9.

⁵ Mark 7:11, 12.

⁶ Matt. 5:34.

⁷ Luke 18:12.

commanded?"¹ a question the application of which would be obvious to his hearers. Again and again he finds that men decline the sacrifices of discipleship under the plea of home ties, a plea frequently covering self-love or timidity; whereupon he retorts, "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."² Did the Lord, then, really mean that in order to be a Christian a man must uproot the natural affections and replace them by an unnatural hatred of his nearest? No; but this and all the declarations we have passed under review are only so many sharp tugs at the steering-rope, extreme efforts called for at the time and under the circumstances, with a view, not of driving the boat into the opposite bank, but of restoring it to midstream. If the result is to impress upon us the fact that there are claims and causes which must take precedence even over the claims of home; that the name of God should not be invoked save with a deep sense of solemnity; that so holy a bond as matrimony must not be dissolved, nor armed resistance resorted to, except as last, unhappy necessities, we shall have understood Jesus aright, and the moral gain will be incalculable.

But having said so much, it has also to be recognized that in some respects, and these the most important, Jesus' root-and-branch antagonism to the prevailing system is not subject to such deductions, but was necessary and justified to the last syllable. The scribes and Pharisees,³ regarding all the prescriptions of the law—and no less those added by their tradition—as equally holy and binding, the ceremonial as much as the moral, had in course of time come actually to exalt the ceremonial *above* the moral law; as Jesus expressed it, they were eager in observing the tithing of the lowliest garden herbs, at the expense of the cardinal virtues—the weightier matters of the law—judgment and mercy, and faith.⁴ Jesus unhesitatingly reverses this valuation, and from the whole body of multifarious commandments selects as the supreme and

¹ Luke 17:9.

² Luke 14:26.

³ We are not denying that there were sincere and pious Pharisees, any more than that there were scribes who had been made disciples to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 13:52).

⁴ Matt. 23:23.

governing ones the love of God and of one's fellow-man.¹ The scribes and Pharisees thought so highly of a scrupulous observance of the Sabbath that they looked upon an act of healing performed on that sacred day as a desecration; Jesus stoutly maintained that to do good to a fellow-being took precedence over the *minutiae* of a technical infraction of Sabbath law.² The scribes and Pharisees placed the whole emphasis upon the outward performance of legal statutes, which might often spring simply from the calculating desire to accumulate merits, so as to have a claim upon divine repayment with interest, a disposition which in turn was bound to lead to self-complacency, self-righteousness, and downright hypocrisy; Jesus laid all the stress on rightness of motive, upon the intents of the heart, which might exalt a very imperfect performance in the eyes of God, while in the absence of the right motive the act had no value whatever. The scribes and Pharisees did their so-called "righteous works" for purposes of display and self-glorification, making a show of their devoutness;³ Jesus looked upon such ostentation, always tinged with hypocrisy, in utter distaste, and commended privacy and reticence in these intimate concerns of the soul.⁴ The scribes and Pharisees were wholly intent upon the reward which in their view God would measure out on strict book-keeping principles, and in exact proportion to the number of legally commanded deeds they had done; Jesus is by no means averse to the idea of divine reward waiting upon faithfulness, loyalty, endurance, and the like, but not only does he shift the emphasis from the legal to the moral field, but his valuation of God-pleasing conduct is qualitative and not quantitative, and Paul focusses the truth as it is in Jesus most accurately when he says that love is the fulfilment of the law.⁵ The scribes and Pharisees held a notion of holiness, of clean and unclean, which was almost wholly concerned with externals, with taboos which declared uncleanness to consist in eating such and such food, or to be contracted by touching a person suffering from such and such a disease; Jesus, with uncompromising directness, sweeps all this legal lumber away, abrogates the cere-

¹ Mark 12:29-31.

² Mark 3:1-6.

³ Matt. 23:5.

⁴ Matt. 6:5, 6, 18.

⁵ Rom. 13:10.

monial law, and makes his great declaration as to cleanness and uncleanness consisting, not in the food, but in the thoughts of a man.¹ That marks a culminating point, as it marked the Lord's final breach with the law. In all these matters, too, we see Jesus laying down principles which were entirely unaffected by his eschatological expectations, but which are and remain of permanent validity.

V

But now we must pass to another group of his teachings, in which we can almost certainly trace the influence of those expectations; teachings which had regard to that end of the world as at present constituted, to which Jesus looked forward as impending in the nearest future. Under this heading we shall first of all glance at his view of property.

In doing so we shall remember first of all that Jesus was a child, not only of his race and age, but also of his class. He was the son of humble people, moving habitually in an environment of poor folk, among the lower strata of a population oppressed and exploited by all above them. As has been well said, "Grinding poverty, bootless labor, anxious care for the morrow, constant suffering from the pride, the greed, and the lust of the well-to-do classes, discontent with the Roman yoke, the Idumean dynasty, and the heavy burdens of taxation, envy and distrust of the rich, the cultured, and the respectable, were characteristic of his social environment. . . . A man cannot have spent most of his life at a carpenter's bench . . . without looking out upon the world through a carpenter's eyes."² Making allowance for a touch of exaggeration in the last sentence, it remains true that Jesus lived in a society where wealth almost always exposed its owner, and that too often justly, to suspicions as to the means by which he had accumulated it—usury, extortion, the ways of the tax-farmer and his underlings; where great possessions, therefore, were more or less a moral reproach, and where on the other hand "poor" and "God-fearing" were almost synonymous terms, since the godly were all but sure to be needy. This outlook, which makes itself felt again and again in the Psalms, naturally colored the thought of Jesus; and if we thus find him hurling

¹ Mark 7:15-23.

² N. Schmidt, *Prophet of Nazareth*, p. 254.

indiscriminate denunciations against the rich and the comfortably off, contrasting their present ease and luxury with their future condition of hunger, want, and worse,¹ we have to take into account the particular phase of civilization, the particular social milieu, in which he lived and spoke.

To sum up, when he says, without any qualification whatever, "Blessed are ye poor," "but woe upon you rich," he is speaking in and of and to his own age; when on the other hand he points out the deceitfulness of riches, their tendency to harden those who own them, and the temptations inherent in the love of wealth, he proclaims truths and warnings which human nature will never outgrow.

But there is more than this to be said on the subject under debate. In the slight estimation which Jesus placed upon settled possessions of any kind, in the advice not to make material provision for the future, but rather to sell all one owned and give the proceeds to the poor,² we hear quite plainly the conviction that property was a useless thing to trouble one's self about on the eve of the great supernatural consummation, upon the very verge of the coming age. Again and again, when men have cherished similar expectations, they have acted in a similar manner, giving away or spending recklessly all they had; but since all such expectations have remained unfulfilled, and since we do not conceive ourselves to be about to witness the expiration of the world as we know it, it is not incumbent on us, as it certainly would be impossible for us, to carry out such precepts.

The same considerations underlie and explain the Lord's attitude to social life in its various aspects—to marriage, the family, the nation, the functions of government, legal tribunals, and the like. All these things, he believes, are coming to an end in the nearest future, together with the dispensation of which they are part and parcel, and are thus of little interest in his eyes; why lay down any rules with regard to institutions which would presently, as soon as the Kingdom dawned, be done away with and be known no more, even as yesterday when it is past? In such a frame of mind one would not trouble about invoking a judge to divide an inherit-

¹ Luke 6:20, 24; 16:19-31.

² Matt. 6:19; Mark 10:21; Luke 12:33.

ance between one's self and another;¹ one would not be anxious for the morrow,² seeing that the morrow might bring the end which in any case was at hand; one would feel it superfluous to resist the evil,³ or to vindicate one's rights, seeing that the Avenger was at the door;⁴ one would submit to the secular demands of the heathen government, whose sands were already running out;⁵ sooner than go to law about an upper garment one would yield the undergarment too;⁶ what did it matter, when in a little while all this momentary order, or disorder, of things would be "erased like an error, and canceled," all the vexatious tangle be straightened out, and all existing conditions be reversed, so that the first should be last, and the last be first.

These, then, are merely temporary elements in the thought of Jesus, which we can without difficulty detach from its permanent kernel; they envisage conditions wholly different from those under which we live, they are the products of an expectation which we do not share, and once we realize this, we can say quite simply and without want of reverence that they are not, and cannot be intended to govern our actions, any more than the garb of the Palestine of the first century is adapted for the Britain of the twentieth.

VI

When it thus comes home to us that our Lord did not "legislate" or issue rules we can follow upon questions of social ethics or economics, that he gives us no theories of civil government or international relationships, that we have no saying of his on such subjects as art or science, education or philosophy, we are apt to feel that his teaching is scanty and incomplete to a degree, covering but a small corner of the great field of human life and action. Such a conclusion, however, natural and plausible as it appears on the surface, would nevertheless reveal a serious misunderstanding of what Jesus intended his message to be and to effect. If one wanted a multiplicity, a perfect network of rules covering every conceivable situation in which a man could find himself from the cradle to the

¹ Luke 12:13-15.

³ Matt. 5:38.

⁵ Mark 12:17.

² Matt. 6:34.

⁴ Luke 18:7, 8.

⁶ Matt. 5:40.

grave, the scribes had already exercised all their ingenuity to elaborate and codify just such a system; there were six hundred and thirteen laws, leaving no relationship or emergency unlegislated for; there were thirty-nine kinds of acts forbidden on the Sabbath; there was nothing left to chance that human foresight could provide for or against. But the Lord's intention was not at all to set up a rival system to this one; to its multifariousness he opposed simplicity, to its endless prohibitions two great commandments, and all the way through he addressed himself directly to the individual soul and its duty in the sight of God. God and the soul are his theme, and what, he exclaims, shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? "With magnificent singleness of aim he makes straight for his one object, viz., to bring about man's undivided allegiance to God." The gospel is not a law of commandments contained in ordinances; Jesus, fully conscious of the abuses which flourished around him, social, political, economic, "lays hold of the evil which he finds among men, not by this or that excrescence, but by the root. He wishes to create new men; once created, they will live and move in new fashions. He did not consider himself called to guide earthly and natural institutions along the line of a slow but steadily growing perfection; he had other work to accomplish. And yet he did accomplish this work, too: for Christianity and civilization have gone hand in hand."¹

A religious teaching which is thus addressed to the individual soul may easily degenerate into a barren pietism; the essential healthiness of Jesus' outlook, his human interests, his strong sense of fellowship with men, warded off any such danger. For he sees the individual always in relation to his fellow-individuals, whether as the member of a household, as employer or employed, conferring a benefit like the Good Samaritan or receiving it like the man whom he befriended, and so on, in every variety of relationships. And the very fact that, next to the commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," he places "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," not as secondary in importance, but as "like unto it," proves how far he was from losing himself in that spiritual egoism which is solely intent on saving its own soul, no matter what may be the

¹ Schrenck, *Jesus and His Teaching*, p. 166.

fate of others here or hereafter. When Jesus, in the judgment discourse,¹ makes entrance to the Kingdom dependent on simple practical kindness, when he proclaims as the standard, "Inasmuch as ye did it—inasmuch as ye did it not unto the least of these," he does more to place human relations on a sound basis than by an elaborate code, providing minutely for this special case or that special category.

On one fundamental aspect of his teaching we can hardly lay too much stress—it was positive, in contradistinction to the scribal system, which consisted very largely of prohibitions, of lists of things to be eschewed. This radical defect was inherent in the fact, previously noted, that the system placed religious and moral relations and duties upon a purely legal level; it followed that the moral ideal inculcated by scribes and Pharisees bore a predominantly negative complexion. A man was accounted righteous who had not transgressed this and that and the other regulation, who had abstained from forbidden kinds of food and refrained from forbidden kinds of acts on the Sabbath. Such a kind of righteousness is, when one gives one's mind to it, not unattainable; it can generate no moral enthusiasm, but on the other hand will give birth to the fatal self-complacency which enumerates its merits when standing before God; "I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get." But when the moral ideal is expressed in positive terms, "Thou shalt love," we get something infinitely stimulating just because entirely unattainable; for no one can say, "I have loved enough, as much as I am bidden," and thus hold himself absolved from loving any more. There can be no end to this obligation; nor will one who seeks to fulfil it wish that there should be an end, for no one loves against his will. That is why Jesus speaks of the righteousness which he enjoins as something that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees; it is a righteousness not of law but of love, and partakes of the infinitude of God himself.

It is here that we perceive the explanation of the Lord's insistence on the ideal of forgiveness, as that which brings us nearest to God: the law cannot forgive, must take its course, but God can

¹ Matt. 25:31-46.

and does forgive, because he is a father, and his name is Love. True, the divine pardon is conditioned by repentance and amendment, nor can we conceive that Jesus imposes the duty of pardoning upon his followers on any other terms; for to forgive and reinstate the unrepentant, while a possible, and to generous natures often a tempting, course, is to put a premium on transgression. It was when the prodigal had arisen to return to his father, with sorrow and shame in his heart, that the father frankly and fully pardoned him; then, and not before, even though he longed to do so all the time; nevertheless, where there is true repentance, there, the Lord tells us, is the duty to forgive, not seven times but seventy times seven; that is, without limit.

And so he rises to his sublimest paradox, the coping-stone of his whole edifice, which must bring this all-too-imperfect survey to a close—the command to love our enemies. We are to aim at that temper which is farthest removed from the censoriousness and vindictiveness of Pharisaism, the frame of mind and heart in which we can see the divine imprint even on the brow of our injurer, still acknowledge his kinship with us (since he is still God's child), grieve over his fall from grace as manifested in the wrong he has done us, and desire his restoration rather than our paltry personal vengeance.

Such a disposition towers above the range of the ordinarily human as the Lord Christ himself towers above our feeble stature. Nevertheless, we are to imitate him, and thus to grow; we are to put away more and more of our imperfection, and approach a little closer to the Divine perfection; and if we will try to love, we shall discover that we have underestimated our powers of loving, which, like all other powers expand with use. He that loveth is born of God, is like God; and he who loves most will come closest—though closest is far off—to the fulfilment of Christ's ideal, realized in him alone: "Ye therefore shall be perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect."